



# Cambodia Diary 2011



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Steve Norman works as a full time Police Officer and is the founder and Director of Ratanak UK. This is a diary of the recent trip that Steve and some believers recently made to Cambodia in November 2011. Steve will be interviewed live on Revelation TV in December – see end of article for details...Steve is available to speak to groups of any size and make up.

Ratanak International works tirelessly in serving the nation of Cambodia in seeking to bring hope to seemingly hopeless situations. If you are looking to find out more about our work or how to get involved please visit [www.ratanakuk.org](http://www.ratanakuk.org) or email [steve@ratanakuk.org](mailto:steve@ratanakuk.org).



## Friday - Only in Cambodia!

Today was the first full day for the UK team in Cambodia. Having spent 17 hours on 3 different aircraft over some 8000 mile we boarded yet another plane to head up to Siem Reap. Thank fully this was a mere 50 minutes! The temperature on leaving Phnom Penh was 34 and on negotiating customs I was asked to surrender my deodorant as it exceeded the maximum size – you can only imagine! Thankfully things cooled down to a lesser 30 degrees by Siem Reap though the crisis

remained. Somewhat ironically my other luggage carried speed detection equipment consisting of battery, wires, etc. and this was not questioned...!

Cambodia is a beautiful nation and this is no different when in the air. From this point we were able to observe the extent of the floods which have claimed 147 lives since September and left many homes damaged beyond repair. As the paddy fields emerge from the flood waters the extent of the damage is being discovered. In amongst this devastation there may be still time if additional crops are planted quickly. With rice forming a significant part of the staple diet this action is so

drastically needed to avert a crisis in the coming months.

After a short freshen up we were then away to the Hotel Mondial to experience an evening of traditional Khmer dance. The beauty and grace of the dancers is quite special.

With a 7am start ahead, and the need to catch up on jet lag, it was time for an early night – or so we hoped. Inserting the card into the reader brought a definite lack of any form of response. Several attempts later with the same response drew the attention of a member of hotel staff. She too had no success until there were 4 all trying different cards and methods of entry to no avail. Eventually we were alerted to the sighs of relief and headed to the room to find a sight that will remain with me for many years. One of the hotel staff standing in the doorway with something resembling a washing line around his waist...! Yes – he had indeed abseiled through the window from the room



above on the third floor on little less than string! Looking a little bemused he calmly picked up the string and walked away with it still coiled around him as if this was a normal everyday task. So – we are now in another room with a key that works, oh and another can of deodorant.

Tomorrow we all leave early for the dedication of the Library and the presentation to the district governor of the aforementioned speed equipment. We are then challenged to a game of ground hockey outside in 30 plus degrees – no sweat! Sadly the plans to head out to Kopreach village with Reaksa on Saturday is cancelled as all the roads have been washed away – I guess that's quite a good excuse!

### **Saturday - A Weekend in Siem Reap**

The two days spent in Siem Reap have produced so many memories and encounters. From the official dedication on the library through the majesty of Angkor Wat to a final farewell to children and university students working tirelessly to effect change not only on their own lives but also on their communities.

The opening ceremony was attended by nearly 300 people from all walks of life including Government officials, the Chief of Police, community elders and the children. To have a celebration with such an overtly Christian content amongst such dignitaries is in itself unusual. Here I was able to present the Chief of Police with a speed radar which was kindly donated for me to bring over. What followed was a radio call and an impromptu training session to around 15 members of the local force! We all stood in the middle of a dirt track

whilst they took it in turns to ride up and down so each could observe and learn. The hope is that with some official endorsement lives will be saved on the surrounding roads.

The community library project provides opportunities for up to 10,000 children in the catchment area to access the internet and use the library and sports facilities. This is the only internet anywhere in this area and for the first time children are able to experience the wider world. They work tirelessly to perfect their reading and computer skills as well as enjoying the recreational facilities. These children live in some of the poorest situations imaginable so readily grasp these opportunities to change their situations.

I also had the privilege to meet the two young men who we are sponsoring through university as they sat and shared devotions and a personal time of worship. Both are doing well in their first term.

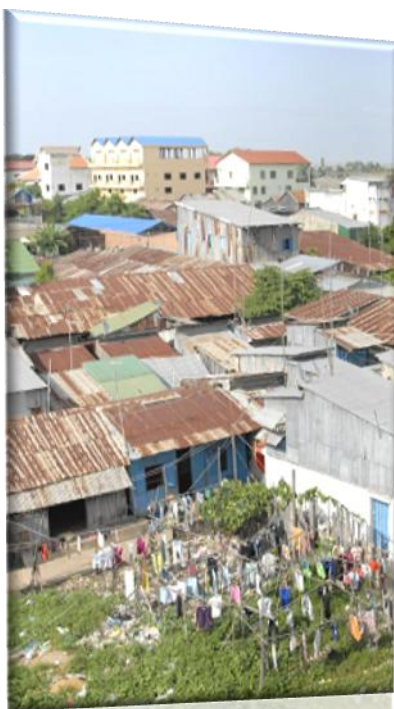
Today we visited Angkor Wat, a world heritage site and location of some 1200 year old temples. As I looked at these vast monuments with their intricate carvings all I could ponder was how much time and energy was put into building these over centuries. Then I reflected on how much time I sometimes put in to my relationship with God and stood

ashamed.

Now we are back in Phnom Penh and the tougher second week begins with a visit to S21 – a prison during the Khmer Rouge reign where between 14 and 22,000 people were ritually tortured. It is then on to Cheoung Ek – the killing where each of these individuals were executed including children and babies. To see this is to begin to understand the tragedy experienced by the majority of the populous.

### **Sunday - Hope Where There Is No Hope**

Today has been a long day. We set out this morning for a visit to Tuol Sleng Museum in the heart of Phnom Penh. This former secondary school was turned into a prison of torture during the Khmer Rouge campaign between 1975-79. Between 14 and 22,000 people of all ages were systematically and brutally tortured to admit crimes against the revolution they had not committed. Each victim was meticulously photographed before being subjected to unimaginable horror. As I walked around I read of the Buddhist belief that unless a person receives a proper burial then they will wander around as ghosts and not find rest. This is a huge issue in this nation and, given



that over 2.5 million people died at the hands of this regime, it is understandable why the faces of many are downcast for their relatives who they believe are still in this place.

From Tuol Sleng we took a 15km tuk tuk ride to Cheoung Ek – a genocide memorial and the final resting place for the thousands of tortured victims. Walking around this is a peaceful environment with large colourful swallowtail butterflies and dragon flies in an assortment of colours. And yet – only a few short years ago, while I was a happy 11 year old, thousands of people met their end with the cruel blow of a bamboo pole to the skull and babies were smashed against a tree which still bears the marks. Along the walkway bones and teeth are visible as the earth gives up the dead after the rains. To imagine this place back then is beyond imagination. It is a necessary experience and yet an unpleasant one. I have walked this path before 2 years ago and was saddened then – today I am broken.

I thank my Lord tonight for the stability of the nation in which I reside.

Tomorrow we will be visiting NewSong and Svey Pak. In the afternoon we will be at the kids club where we will join 350 children – many of whom are being subjected to sexual assault as I type. We will also visit The Sanctuary and Rahab's house and see that there is hope even in this darkest of places. A hope that Christ only can bring.

### **Monday - Light in the Darkness**

Today we headed over to NewSong to meet with Bridget. Living here are 54 girls between 5 and 20, all who have been subjected to some of the most unimaginable abuse. It is so hard to create a picture of this place for you. The surroundings are beautiful and the staff are beyond words. Their love for these children is so clear and that is reciprocated by the kids. Here children recover something of their lost lives. It is an incredible experience and blessing to come here and meet children who arrived with the belief that they were worthless, dirty and unlovable. This could be no further from the truth and through the

patient work and testimony of the staff lives are being changed. These kids have come to know the love of Christ who died for them and loves unreservedly and without condition. One little girl aged somewhere around 14 was never far away - she now suffers from minor brain damage following the amount of drugs forced into her in the brothels.

Then we were treated to lunch with the girls – green Thai curry! To sit amongst these kids, many of whom have been the victims of white western men, is an honour again I can barely describe.

After lunch we take another long tuk tuk drive to visit The Sanctuary, Rahab's House and The Lords Gym. As we arrived a bus full of very young children pulled up who were brought in from the brick kilns where their families are held in bonded labour. The last time I was here The Sanctuary was an aspiration and a wreck. Today it resonates to the sound of children at the kids club singing songs to Jesus and being allowed the luxury of being children for 2 hours of the day. Many of these kids will leave here and be sold tonight to satisfy the cravings of the men who prey on them. Bridget commented, "We live at the gates of hell – but there is a lot of hope here." It cannot be put more succinctly than that. In the midst of a tangible darkness the light of Christ burns with a fierce intensity. This community is being turned around one life at a time.

As we wander through the buildings I meet with girls making bracelets. I ask for one with my wife's name on and am told it will take around 30 minutes. True to form the bracelet is delivered by a lovely girl who says a few words and leaves. I then find out that she has hardly spoken a word since her rescue several years ago – so deep is the trauma locked inside.

Don & Bridget are an incredible couple who acted in response to a need. Described so aptly today as 'Nike Christianity' – they just did it. No qualifications or experience in this area – just a heart for children in a land far from home who needed help. Pray for them and the staff who they work so closely with. Pray for safety in a hostile environment,

for provision to do more and for wisdom to act in the right way at the right time. Pray for these children and for their protection and for this community that it will turn to Jesus and away from the trade it is world renowned for.

### **Tuesday - Beauty for Ashes**

Today was the day I was so very much looking forward to since this trip became a reality. It is the day we spent with our partners from Hagar – an organisation who, to quote the words of staff, deal with the things in the too difficult basket. That resonates with everything I am and everything we strive to be as an organisation. When this journey began just over 3 years ago I was warned to stay away from working with sexually exploited in Cambodia as 'it is too difficult and too dangerous'. How far away from the truth can that be. Is it difficult? Yes. Is it dangerous? Sometimes yes. Is it impossible – with God absolutely not. In him can be found all hope and through him full restoration can be found and through him all things are possible.

After a day out we freshened up before a tuk tuk drive through a totally gridlocked Phnom Penh to the mall and Lucky Burger. I would like to describe this as rush hour though we were rushing nowhere!! I was so

excited for this moment. Here we met up with some Hagar staff and 10 girls from 2 foster care homes funded by Ratanak International – 1 from the UK and 1 from Canada. We sat amongst the girls and chatted about family and what brought us to Cambodia like old friends as we shared a meal together. These kids have suffered abuse on a scale

that a normal human being cannot and should not be able to conceive. That humanity would stoop so low to exploit a child to such an extent is beyond my levels of comprehension.



After eating it is time for gifts with Liz and Susan handing out bracelets, toiletries and hair bands. Girls chatter comparing their new gifts with beaming faces. I reached into a bag I brought over and took out a bunch of Ratanak teddy bears. The gasp is audible and as each bear is received it is hugged and held onto tightly before being decorated with the bands and bracelets then hugged a little more. A little 8 year old girl then leans over and asks my name before naming her teddy after me. After ice cream and more conversation it is time to say farewell and head off. At the bottom of a set of steps the same 8 year old wanders over and asks her mentor how to say some words

to me in English. I kneel on the pavement as she look into my eyes and says, 'Thank you, as long as I live I will never forget you'.

Tonight, once again, my heart aches but this time it is with the joy of seeing young lives rescued and restored. I am now beginning to understand with a little more clarity what it means to be in awe of God

as I witness his hand at work in the lives of these children. Moreover, I appreciate more fully that we serve a mighty, mighty God who is able to do everything we can ask or imagine – and often more than we dare imagine.

Please pray for the Hagar staff who work with these and many more children and who listen to the terrible stories many times. Pray for strength and wisdom for them and that they will experience more of God at work through them. Pray also for the team of Liz, Susan, Tim & Debs from the UK, Brian & Melissa from Canada, Brian & Jason from Australia and Lisa who now lives here together with all those around the world that volunteer their help with us. Thank you.

### **Wednesday - An Extravagant God**



After a hectic week it has been great today to have a slightly more relaxing day allowing the team time to reflect and catch up a little. This morning we headed off to Bloom Vocational Training Centre and Café to meet with Ruth, Murray & Tanya from Australia. Carrying the strap line 'Too beautiful to eat too delicious to resist' Bloom rightly describes itself as an oasis in the middle of Phnom Penh. Here 32 girls take lessons and have qualified in a variety of hospitality and catering subjects – including cake making and decorating. The cakes meet the description and are totally breath taking – tasting pretty good too! The final pieces made for the exams are on display and are extravagant in their design together with a

cabinet of simply amazing cupcakes. These cakes are sold to a largely local clientele and through the café for a variety of occasions and have attracted media coverage around the globe.

The centre has only been operating since January 2010 and has clients from the Prime Minister down. Capable of making and decorating cakes of up to 7 tiers this centre is a hive of industry. As you know Tim & Debs are here as part of their honeymoon and to celebrate their marriage we had a cake made!



As I have thought more on the day and the opulence of these cakes I reflected on the character of God. The exceeding abundance with which he loves us, cares for us and desires to live our lives to the fullest measure are reflected in the magnificent creations which exceed anything you could imagine. We should be eternally thankful that we serve a God who wants to bless us to excess and lavish himself on us for no other reason than he can do it.

Tomorrow we head to Daughters and the visitor centre which was the first project we funded from the UK. It's likely to be more cake I'm afraid...!



## Thursday - Sons & Daughters

So, the penultimate day of visits arrived with a day spent at Daughters of Cambodia. Daughters seeks to help victims of sexual exploitation to find ways out of this situation and into one of safety, freedom and dignity, to find wholeness, and to become all that God created them to be. The vision is to empower clients with the internal capacity and the external resources to change their own lives. Internal resources involve empowering clients to make changes to their own lives, within their own cultural and social contexts, promoting healthy decision making so that changes are internal, voluntary and sustainable rather than imposed.

At the main centre we were introduced to many of the staff who receive a variety of training in making clothes, jewellery, wood crafts, etc. all of which are then sold through outlets including the shop in Phnom Penh. All the girls given employment here were working in street prostitution and have chosen to walk away from that to work here.

Since I was last here a new programme called Sons has started reaching out to the highly marginalised lady boys. This group are hugely persecuted and are given no value or respect in this society. Here they find training & teaching – but more importantly hope.

The next part of the visit was very special – we went to the shop, exhibition centre and café which was the first project Ratanak UK was able to support. What a wonderful privilege it was and what an amazing place it is. Offering employment to 15 people across a broad range of areas including beauty, retail, catering and hospitality, the store oozes charm. It was a touching experience to see the reality. Every detail is beautifully taken care of.

Please pray for Ruth, the founder of this programme, who has sacrificed so much to do this. Her drive, compassion and tenacity are



an inspiration. Pray also for the staff and clients of Daughters who work so very hard.

Throughout this trip the common theme has been that of hope. It is so easy to see the darkness around us as we negotiate the different areas and yet the one thing we have to hold on to is the hope that is

found nowhere else than in Christ. At Daughters today on the wall was written out the hymn – ‘On Christ alone my hope is found’. Whether we are on the streets with children who are being sold, in the foster home where they are safe, at the café eating beautiful cakes or in the shop admiring the amazing creations – the one thing that runs through all is hope. The hope of a better future and a restored life.

### Friday - The Final Chapter

The last night of the 2011 Ratanak vision trip has arrived and with it the final blog. Today we met with Adam from Prison Fellowship Cambodia (PFC) at the rehabilitation centre, the only one of its kind in Cambodia. Here Prison Fellowship carry significant influence which has developed over many years of hard work and determination. Success stories like the one from Correctional Centre 3, funded by Ratanak Canada, do not happen by accident. Here, with a prison population of 1500, over 900 have received Christ. The consequences are quite staggering which have not gone unnoticed by the authorities both in the prison itself and the wider circle. A full programme of vocational training, language classes, healthcare and rehabilitation programmes have changed the face of this prison. The governor insists that any prisoner who is to be promoted is a Christian;



he himself has remained in post for a much longer time than usual due primarily to the changes seen.

This programme is now duplicated at Kampong Thom prison supported by Ratanak UK. Having only begun last year the impact of the work by the PFC team are already being noticed. This is a part of a programme to adopt a prison incorporating church partnerships both in Cambodia and outside. For just over \$2 per month per inmate we have been able to provide the outlined services. For more information of what this entails and how to get involved in this please drop me an email.

This afternoon a funny thing happened. We dropped into the local market for some last minute shopping before heading for the mandatory chocolate brownie at Café Yejj! As I crossed the road I was followed by a small girl aged around 10 – she was in fact begging. I had no small change so, knowing it was my last time here, gave her \$1 (this is actually a huge donation here). Time passed and a lady arrived with her young some also begging. Feeling a little obliged I again placed a dollar into an empty bowl whilst the same girl smiled at me from across the road. It was then I discovered this was a tag team of mother and daughter! I finished my coffee and saw across the road the little girl appear. She wandered across to the middle of the highway to show

me a bag of fruit and snacks which she pointed out were bought with the dollar. As she walked back away she turned again, smiled and mouthed ‘thank you’ before waving and disappearing from view.

Statistics show that 70% of this country exists on less than \$2 a day and 33% on less than 50 cents. Today I witnessed the reality of that where a mere dollar (65 pence) gave a child a meal she may never have had. I guess I tell you this to try to explain how far finances can stretch here and what a significant difference even the smallest donation can make whether it is educating a prisoner, feeding a child or providing refuge for a victim of sex trafficking.

I thought that the first trip 2 years ago was life changing and that this time it would be about building on relationships. Whilst that has definitely been the case – it has also been life changing. From being told you will never be forgotten by an 8 year old victim through the celebration that is Daughters shop to the child on the street being thankful for a meal, this trip has served to set my determination greater than ever to work for and alongside the people of Cambodia to effect changes that will last. I have seen Gods hand at work in very young children to a group of old ladies in a Ratanak funded night shelter. And – by no means least – I have spent time with some people who are beyond description. People who have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice in so many ways to show the love of Jesus to the Khmer in

deeds and words. I am greatly humbled by each of them and count it an absolute honour to be called their friend.

Thank you to everyone for following this journey and being patient with me through the tough times. I have had the support of a great team from Northern Ireland, Canada and Australia.

In closing I read a quote from Sydney J Harris – ‘Regrets for the things we did can be tempered by time: regrets for the things we did not do – that is inconsolable.’

To God be all the glory

## **STEVE NORMAN UK DIRECTOR RATANAK**



## **LIVE INTERVIEW – REVELATION TV**

**21<sup>st</sup> December 2011 @ 9pm GMT**



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